TALLGRASS PRAIRIE NATIONAL PRESERVE

Flint Hills, Chase County, Kansas

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SITE AS A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: RECOGNIZING CULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCE VALUES

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve was established in 1996 "to preserve, protect, and interpret for the public an example of tallgrass prairie ecosystem…and to preserve and interpret for the public the historic and cultural values represented on the Spring Hill Ranch." The preserve encompasses 10,894 acres in the heart of the Flint Hills region of Chase County, Kansas, where visitors can experience the quiet and solitude of the prairie landscape and understand the role that landscape played in the complex history of human activity. In 1997, the entire property was listed as a national historic landmark for its association with both the cattlemen's empire of the late nineteenth century and the transition from the open range to the enclosed holdings of the large cattle companies in the 1880s. This cultural landscape includes a number of buildings related to the ranching era—the ranch headquarters, stone fence lines, and water features—as well as less prominent habitation sites from occupation by Native American and European American settlers.

Human activity in the Kansas Flint Hills can be traced back 10,000 years, first to a culture of hunter-gatherers, and later to native people (possibly Wichita, Kansa, Osage, and Pawnee) who developed ceramic technologies, domesticated plants, and hunted bison. Following the Civil War, settlers began to pour into the Flint Hills region, which led to a number of treaties and relocations of native people. With the coming of the railroad, bison disappeared and farmers began to raise crops and graze cattle, often constructing limestone walls as fencing, which remains a feature of the preserve's landscape today. A number of ranchers have owned the property during the last 130 years; they have seen ranching in the Flint Hills mature from the unfenced grazing practices of the open range to small herds raised in enclosed pastures. The Spring Hill Ranch headquarters and one-room limestone Lower Fox Creek schoolhouse are structural features of the preserve's ranching history. The public has also identified several preserve viewsheds—rolling hills, floodplain, and vast open landscape with few human intrusions—as important resources.

The preserve's rolling grasslands also comprise an important natural landscape. Two major creeks cross the property, and numerous springs, seeps, and stock ponds dot the landscape. The preserve protects a significant example of tallgrass prairie, one of the rarest of North America's major ecosystems. Today, less than four percent remains of

what most authorities believe was the dominant vegetation type in the eastern third of the Great Plains. The rarity of this remnant ecosystem makes the preserve an important storehouse for genetic diversity.

BACKGROUND

The creation of a prairie park as a unit of the U.S. national park system has a long and controversial history. In the 1920s, academics at Midwestern universities first began to study the feasibility of preserving a portion of tallgrass prairie ecosystem within the national park system. The idea was given little real consideration until the early 1960s, when a prairie national park was proposed in Kansas. Fear of the use of eminent domain by the federal government and ranchers' reluctance to lose prime grasslands for grazing stalled the idea.

In the 1970s, a split developed between prairie park proponents. Some wished to see the creation of a museum park that would commemorate the history of ranching on the Great Plains. Others were concerned with preserving a piece of the true prairie ecosystem before it disappeared. In 1975, the National Park Service (NPS) conducted a prairie park feasibility study. As one of the study's land acquisition and management concepts, National Park Service planners included a Flint Hills agricultural reserve model based on the British national park concept. This model envisioned regional management of privately owned land "based on a unified effort, beginning at county and state levels,"[i] and stressed the distinctive cultural as well as natural history of the Flint Hills prairie landscape of Kansas and Oklahoma.

In 1988, the National Audubon Society secured an option to purchase the 10,984-acre Z Bar Ranch near Strong City, Kansas. Many who had been working toward the establishment of a prairie park saw this as a potential opportunity and moved quickly to propose the creation of a national monument as an alternative use of the land. Local concern again centered on the fear that federal involvement could lead to additional land being purchased through eminent domain, federal controls on adjacent property owners, and removal of the land from local tax rolls. But the possible sale of the Z Bar Ranch started a dialogue that brought together representatives of a number of distinct interests and viewpoints. This dialogue was carried out in the halls of Congress as well as on the Kansas prairie. Ultimately, it was agreed that a private nonprofit organization could purchase and own the land and manage it in partnership with the National Park Service. In 1994, the National Park Trust (created by the National Parks and Conservation Association in 1983 as a nonprofit land trust) bought the Z Bar Ranch after National Audubon's option expired.

The 1996 congressional legislation that established Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve limited federal ownership to no more than 180 acres of the nearly 11,000-acre ranch, and required that it be acquired by donation. The legislation also stipulated that the preserve be managed in conjunction with the property owner (the National Park Trust). The

designation of "preserve" rather than "park" offered the National Park Service more flexibility in managing the area in partnership with the National Park Trust. Necessary activities such as grazing and honoring the current 35-year oil and gas lease could continue. The legislation established a thirteen-member Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve advisory committee to be appointed by the Secretary of the Interior.

THE ISSUE

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve was established both to protect a significant example of tallgrass prairie ecosystem and to protect and interpret the human history of the landscape. Native American use of the Flint Hills, which can be traced back 10,000 years, is reflected on the property in both archaeological sites and a myriad of plant species important for cultural use. The preserve is also significant for its 130-year history of cattle ranching, which has left behind buildings, stone fences, and other landscape features. These cultural features are overlaid on one of the last remnant pieces of native tallgrass prairie ecosystem in North America, meaning that both cultural and ecological values must simultaneously be recognized and preserved on one 11,000-acre parcel of land. The land is also one of the few large tracts in the region that is under public ownership, so land managers must also consider public recreational opportunities.

Because of the controversial history and past local opposition to the establishment of a prairie park, managers must also address the concerns and interests of local community members. The National Park Service (NPS) has worked hard to balance all of these interests in the development of the preserve's general management plan. The park service has looked to outside experts for good research and scientific data, and has used the recommendations of a multidisciplinary panel and an advisory committee to develop a zone system to provide for the preservation of all the preserve's natural and cultural values.

METHOD: INTEGRATION OF CULTURAL AND NATURAL VALUES THROUGH THE GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Planning Team

Because of the controversy over the establishment of Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, the NPS Midwest regional director decided that the preserve's general management plan should be prepared within the region rather than by the Denver Service Center. The process took nearly three and one-half years to complete but was regarded very positively by the National Park Service, the National Park Trust, and interest groups and individuals in surrounding communities. Those on the planning team believed it was important to move slowly and be thorough in gathering all existing information, and to seek public input and involvement throughout the process in order to garner support. Both the

National Park Service and the National Park Trust have focused on constituency building and developing good relationships with other organizations and individuals.

The 13-member Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve advisory committee includes three representatives of the National Park Trust; three representatives of local landowners, cattle ranchers, or other agricultural interests; three representatives of conservation or historic preservation interests; one range management specialist from a Kansas university; and one representative each appointed by the governor, the county commission, and local municipal officials. The committee members advised the National Park Service in preparation of the park's general management plan and environmental impact statement, and will continue to advise the Secretary of the Interior and the director of the National Park Service on the development, management, and interpretation of the preserve.

Before developing a series of alternatives, the planning team developed a set of "desired futures" for the preserve based on the park's mission. As well as addressing ecological issues and visitor experience and education, the desired futures stressed the need for managing natural and cultural resources together "to preserve the character-defining features of the Flint Hills cultural landscape." The team also stressed maintaining a strong partnership between NPS and the National Park Trust and maintaining an effective working relationship between the preserve's management team and the preserve's neighbors, adjacent communities, and other partners to foster cooperation on issues of mutual interest such as viewsheds, water quality, transportation, and fire management.

Use of Expert Panels

Because of the limited time for detailed scientific studies on site, the planning team looked at research that has been conducted at similar locations in the Midwest, such as the Konza Prairie Biological Station operated by Kansas State University, the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve operated by The Nature Conservancy in Oklahoma, and Walnut Creek National Wildlife Refuge in Iowa. The team also assembled two panels to solicit scientific, technical, scholarly, and practical resource management advice.

The enhancement panel was composed of academics in natural resource fields who could contribute expertise in conservation biology, rangeland science, botany, zoology, and terrestrial and aquatic ecology. The panel was asked to provide opinions on the effects of different fire and grazing regimes on biodiversity and productivity in the tallgrass prairie ecosystem based on research conducted in ecologically similar areas.

These recommendations were then given to the sustainable management panel, a group made up of practitioners with experience in livestock and bison ranching, economics, cultural geography, ecology, and recreation. This panel was charged with translating the enhancement panel's recommendations into an on-the-ground management strategy consistent with NPS management policies, and drafting an economic analysis for various management options in order to meet the sustainability objectives stated in the

legislation. The panel was also asked to consider recreational opportunities for the public and to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of Spring Hill Ranch.

The Plan

The preferred management alternative was not one of the preliminary alternatives presented early on, but was a composite developed in large part from public input and consultation with the advisory committee and expert panels during the planning process. The preferred alternative will divide the preserve into four management areas: the visitor information and orientation area, the Flint Hills ranching legacy area, the day use area, and the prairie landscape area. Integrating the management of natural and cultural resources will pose the greatest challenge within the prairie landscape area. Here, the cultural history of Native American groups will be a major educational thrust. More than 400 vascular plants have been inventoried, 200 of which were of concern to native peoples. Cultural artifacts also exist from the ranching period; these include spring boxes, more than 37 miles of stone fencing constructed in the 1870s through 1890s, and stock ponds mainly constructed in the 1940s and 1950s. Potentially, these cultural resources could become instrumental in achieving natural resource management goals. For example, stock ponds might provide needed water sources for maintaining a bison herd, and stone fences could act as fire breaks in a fire management strategy.

Because there is very little public land in the Flint Hills region and a significant population looking for recreational opportunities on large tracts, managers of Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve will need to play a careful balancing act to provide recreation while protecting resources "unimpaired." The current thought is to minimize development and tie recreation to experiencing prairie culture through lower-impact activities such as hiking or primitive camping. The preserve can provide visitors with a unique opportunity to camp out under the stars and sense the vastness of the open prairie much as cattlemen did more than 100 years ago.

Interdisciplinary Approach to Planning

The park superintendent intends to use an interdisciplinary planning process to develop more specific management plans. He will assemble a group of resource professionals in disciplines related to both natural and cultural resources to address all issues, regardless of whether issues seem to be weighted more heavily in one realm or the other. This larger group will gather for one or two days to discuss issues and concerns. Afterward, a core team will take the information and recommendations and write a draft plan.

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[i] Conard, Rebecca, and Susan Hess. *Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve Legislative History, 1920-1996.* Prepared by Tallgrass Historians L.C. for National Park Service Midwest Support Office, 1998, 21. Unpublished.